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Meeting the Problem of Mental Defectiveness

A paper read before the

New York State Conference of Charities and Correction

At Buffalo, November 20, 1913

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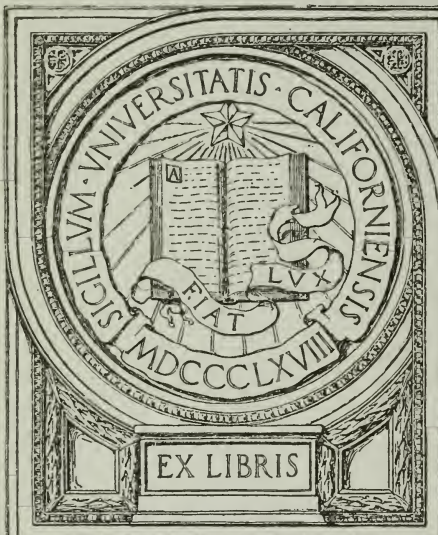

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MEETING THE PROBLEM OF MENTAL DEFECTIVENESS

By Hastings H. Hart, LL. D.,

Director of the Department of Child-Helping, Russell Sage Foundation. A Paper Read before the New York State Conference of Charities and Correction at Buffalo, November 20, 1913.

There is no definite information as to the number of feeble-minded individuals in the State of New York. Estimates run all the way from one in three hundred of the population to one in two hundred of the population. If we accept the more moderate figure of one in three hundred of the population, we must have in the State of New York at least 30,000. I would estimate the number of feeble-minded persons now in public institutions as follows:

In Institutions for Feeble-Minded and Epileptic.

In the Syracuse State Institution for Feeble-Minded Children, September 30, 1911	551
In the State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women, September 30, 1911	792
In the Rome State Custodial Asylum, September 30, 1911	1,230
In the Letchworth Village, September 30, 1911	59
New York City Institution for Feeble-Minded on Randall's Island, September 30, 1911	1,108
In the Craig Colony for Epileptics (estimated)	1,200
Total	~~3,900~~ 4,940

In Institutions for Other Classes.

In hospitals for insane (estimate 15 per cent)	5,000
In state prisons and jails (estimate 15 per cent)	1,500
In girls' reformatories (estimate 40 per cent)	400
In boys' reformatories (estimate 20 per cent)	900
In almshouses, per census of 1904 (2,232)	2,200
Total	10,000

It appears, therefore, that out of an established feeble-minded population of 30,000, about 5,000 are cared for in institutions designed for them, and about 10,000 are confined in institutions not intended for their care, while about 15,000, or one-half of the whole, are at large in the community.

I estimate that, of the 30,000 feeble-minded in the State, 10,000 are girls or women of child-bearing age, located approximately as follows:

In Institutions for Feeble-Minded and Epileptic.

In the Syracuse State Institution for Feeble-Minded Children	160
In the State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women	800
In the Rome State Custodial Asylum	275
In the Institution for Feeble-Minded at Randall's Island	500
In Craig Colony for Epileptics	225
Total	1,960

In Institutions for Other Classes.

In hospitals for insane	2,500
In state prisons and jails	350
In girls' reformatories	350
In almshouses	700
Total	3,900

It appears, therefore, that of the 10,000 (estimated) feeble-minded women of child-bearing age in the State of New York only about 2,000 are cared for in institutions designed for their care and about 4,000 are confined in hospitals for the insane, reformatories and prisons, while at least 4,000 (probably many more) are at large in the community.

With reference to the 10,000 feeble-minded who are confined in hospitals for insane, prisons, reformatories and almshouses, the State would actually be a financial gainer by providing for them in custodial institutions. At the Rome State Custodial Asylum and the State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women 1,966 inmates are humanely cared for at $138.22 per year. The

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same class of inmates are being cared for in the boys' reformatories at $243, in the hospitals for insane at $203.30, in the girls' reformatories at $285.15, and in the almshouses at about $65.15 per year. If all of these persons were transferred to an institution conducted on the scale of the Rome Custodial Asylum, they would not only relieve these institutions of inmates who do not belong there and who are a great cause of care and anxiety, but they would make room for new patients of the proper class, obviating the necessity for enlargement. The money thus saved would build ample institutions for the care of these people at a much less per capita cost than that of the prisons, reformatories, asylums for insane, etc., where they are now kept, and the annual per capita cost of maintenance would be reduced from 20 to 50 per cent, except in almshouses, where the cost would be increased about $1 per week; but the almshouse inmates compose only a small fraction of the whole number.

Estimated Annual Cost of Care of Feeble-Minded in the State of New York.

	As they are now kept.	If kept in colonies like the Newark and Rome custodial asylums. (Avge. per cap. $138.00.)
In hospitals for insane, 5,000 at $203.30	$1,016,000	$690,000
In state prisons and jails, 1,500 at $182.50	274,000	208,000
In boys' reformatories, 900 at $243	219,000	125,000
In girls' reformatories, 400 at $285.15	114,000	55,000
In almshouses, 2,200 at $65.15	143,000	304,000
Total (10,000)	$1,766,000	$1,382,000

The foregoing table shows the cost of the care of 10,000 feeble-minded people who are now kept in institutions not intended for them, as compared with what the cost would be if they were kept in institutions at the same rate at which adult feeble-minded persons are kept in the State Custodial Asylum at Rome and the State Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women at Newark. As nearly as can be ascertained, these 10,000 people are now costing at the rate of $176.60 each year, amounting to $1,766,000, but if they were

kept at the same rate as the two asylums above mentioned, they would cost $138.20 each per year; a total of $1,382,000. This would result in a saving of $384,000 per year, by the simple expedient of building special institutions for the feeble-minded, instead of increasing accommodations for them in institutions where they do not belong.

It is difficult to ascertain the cost of the plants of institutions in which these 10,000 feeble-minded are now kept. The juvenile reformatories have cost about $1,000 per bed. The prisons and the institutions for insane have probably cost more than $1,000 per bed and the almshouses less, but probably the average would not be less than $1,000 per bed.

The cost of the two custodial institutions for feeble-minded has been about $650 per bed.

To build for 10,000 persons at $1,000 per bed would cost $10,000,000.

To build for 10,000 persons at $650 per bed would cost $6,500,000.

If therefore the state will build custodial institutions for 10,000 feeble-minded persons who are now in institutions and transfer these inmates so as to make room for the normal increase of the insane, the prisoners, the juvenile delinquents and paupers to the number of 10,000, there will result an actual saving of $3,500,000.

I would suggest that this estimate be submitted to the careful scrutiny of the experts of the State Board of Charities, the State Lunacy Commission, and the State Prison Commission, and, if it is confirmed by their judgment, that steps be taken to execute this simple program.

I desire to emphasize the fact that one-half of the 30,000 feeble-minded of this State are already under public care but that two-thirds of them are cared for in the wrong kind of institutions. This difficulty can be remedied without increasing the public burden, in the manner already suggested. That leaves 15,000 feeble-minded for whom no public provision has yet been made. It must be remembered that these 15,000 persons are being cared for in some way. We do not allow them to starve to death, but they are fed, clothed and housed, usually by the self-denying labor of their relatives. Thousands of poor mothers are giving up their lives largely to the care of feeble-minded children but these mothers are unable to prevent them from becoming a menace to the com-

munity, and, in the long run, it would be far more economical for the community to separate them in institutions than to allow them to remain in the homes, only to become ultimately, paupers, criminals, prostitutes, or parents of children like themselves.

If the State is already providing for 33,000 insane in public institutions it should be able to provide for 15,000 feeble-minded.

Why is it that the State has provided institutions for 33,000 insane while it has provided institutions for only 5,000 feeble-minded? It is because of the popular superstition in the community that the insane are dangerous while the feeble-minded are harmless. We are learning at last that the feeble-minded boy and girl are three times more of a menace to the community than the senile dement and the mild chronic insane in our hospitals.

It is not to be expected in the nature of things that the State will instantly make provision for the 15,000 feeble-minded who are now without public care, but it is reasonable to expect the State immediately to make provision for the most dangerous portion of the feeble-minded in the community. What portion is that?

In answer to an inquiry, Dr. Henry H. Goddard of Vineland, N. J., stated that the feeble-minded girl is vastly more dangerous to the community than the feeble-minded boy. The reason for this statement is that the heredity of feeble-mindedness for the most part, comes from the feeble-minded girl. Not only is this true but investigations made in New Jersey have demonstrated that the feeble-minded woman is twice as prolific as the normal woman. This arises partly from the fact that the feeble-minded woman is unable to protect herself, partly from the fact that she is not affected by the moral restraints or the regard for consequences which restrain the normal woman.

I estimate that the number of feeble-minded women of child-bearing age outside of institutions in the State of New York is about 5,000. Suitable institutions can be provided for this number of feeble-minded women at a cost not exceeding $3,500,000. Mr. Alexander Johnson, who is an eminent authority on this subject, maintains that a much smaller sum will suffice and he is undertaking a demonstration of this fact in New Jersey.

The maintenance of these women, at the rate now prevailing in the State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-minded Women at Newark ($125 per year), would amount to $625,000 per year.

From an economic standpoint no investment of the State could be more productive. As it is, we are multiplying the feeble-minded variety of the human race in the State of New York with increasing rapidity. Recent investigations reveal the fact that from 20 to 40 per cent of the inmates of our jails, prisons and reformatories are feeble-minded and we are discovering that a very large proportion (perhaps 30 per cent) of the prostitutes are feeble-minded. It appears that feeble-mindedness is the most hereditary disease of all that afflict humanity.

If every feeble-minded woman should be faithfully segregated for 20 years, at least 50 per cent of the feeble-mindedness would disappear. Feeble-mindedness is no less an evil than tuberculosis but the extirpation of feeble-mindedness is a much simpler problem than the extirpation of the white plague.

From the standpoint of philanthropy, no unfortunate has a stronger claim upon us than the feeble-minded girl. When anyone offers an insult or an affront to a little girl of six or eight years of age, the whole community rises to her protection. Any normal man, even though he may himself be a man of unworthy character, stands ready to sacrifice his life, if necessary, in defense of such a child. It is recognized that her innocence, her helplessness, and her confiding nature, give her a claim upon the chivalrous regard of every man.

The feeble-minded girl of 15, 16 or 18 years is, in body, a woman with the instincts and dangers of womanhood, but in mind she is a child — no more responsible than her younger sister of six or eight years. She is innocent, gentle, affectionate, confiding. She believes everything that is said to her. If any man tells her that she is the prettiest girl in town she believes him. If he says that he will find her a situation at $10 a week, she follows him with simple confidence.

This larger child is entitled to the same chivalrous protection which is given to her little sister. She is entitled to *more,* because of the additional exposure which is due to her larger growth.

What happens to this innocent, helpless, confiding child? She is pursued by thoughtless and evil men and is hunted like a rabbit. She is ruthlessly destroyed without regard to her helplessness. When she goes astray, we send her to a reformatory where she is treated as a responsible being. She is admonished, exhorted, disciplined, punished, prayed over. She is paroled and sent out into a home on trial, but is returned because she is

inefficient. Finally she is discharged, because the law does not permit her retention or because the institution is overcrowded. She goes back to the same environment from which she originally came, and soon falls a victim to the same influences which caused her original trouble. She is branded as an incorrigible, a repeater, and an enemy to society. She is cast out and despised by reputable women. She is sent time after time to the jail or the House of Correction.

This unfortunate and helpless girl takes a frightful revenge upon the community which has first neglected and then rejected her. She becomes a source of corruption and disease to scores of young men and she bears children one after another who inherit her infirmities and entail similar afflictions. (I saw in a hospital for the insane, a few days ago, a feeble-minded woman who had been the mother of nine children.)

The folly and waste of the present system is apparent when we recognize that these same young women who now overcrowd our reformatories and prisons and go forth to become prostitutes or to multiply the race of feeble-minded children may easily be made a wholesome and happy element in the community. In a properly ordered institution these girls are gentle, obedient, amiable, religious, helpful and joyous. Their lives are brightened by simple pleasures and they cheerfully render helpful service. Many of them can be made entirely self-supporting in an institution, under direction and all of them can be fully protected from the dangers that would destroy them if they were turned loose in society. This is not a matter of theory but has been completely demonstrated by experience.

The admirable program for the care of the feeble-minded which was presented at the meeting of this body in Syracuse last year by the Hon. Robert W. Hebberd, is a reasonable and practical one. Its execution, as Mr. Hebberd indicated, will necessarily involve considerable time. I believe that its execution can be hastened by the immediate adoption of the following measures:

First. Legislation should be secured which will make it possible to keep feeble-minded persons in institutions as long as may be necessary for their own protection or for the protection of society, just as insane patients are held. Feeble-minded inmates are now removable from most of our institutions at the pleasure of parents or guardians. Legislation should be secured also which will provide that when any inmate of a reformatory, prison or

almshouse is believed to be a feeble-minded person, he may be taken into court and adjudged feeble-minded and may then be held as long as may be necessary for the public welfare.

Second. That the Legislature provide for the erection of cottages, auxiliary to the State reformatories at Elmira, Bedford, Albion, Hudson, and Industry which will provide for the feeble-minded contingent, in each of those institutions, at a little distance from the reformatory department. This will make it possible to establish and maintain a different order of discipline for the feeble-minded inmates from that which is necessary for the normal inmates. As soon as provision is made in separate institutions for the feeble-minded class, these cottages will become available for normal inmates without any financial loss whatever; but in the meantime these institutions will be relieved from the embarrassment which they all suffer from the intermingling of normal and feeble-minded inmates, and will be able to do much better work for both classes.

This plan has already been proposed by Dr. Katherine B. Davis for the State Reformatory for Women at Bedford and is equally applicable to the other institutions named.

Third. Discontinue the admission of boys, and of girls under the age of 12 years, to the State institutions for feeble-minded at Rome, Syracuse and Letchworth Village and at Randall's Island, until all the young women of child-bearing age have been cared for. This suggestion is made because, as already indicated, the feeble-minded young woman is many times as dangerous to the community as the feeble-minded young man.

Fourth. Adopt simple and less expensive plans of building and equipment in order to make it possible to provide for larger numbers. This economy should be exercised wisely, however, in order that the welfare, comfort, and happiness of the inmates may not be neglected.

Fifth. Push the Letchworth Village to completion without delay and inaugurate another institution for feeble-minded children in the western part of the State forthwith.

In urging that immediate provision be made for the older feeble-minded children — especially for young women, no new policy is advocated. The State of New York committed itself to this policy when it established the State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women and the Rome State Custodial Asylum. What is now advocated is to make effective immediately the policy which the State has been tardily pursuing for many years.

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